

VZCZCXRO1795
PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHNN
DE RUEHHM #1144/01 2790725
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 060725Z OCT 06
FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1570
INFO RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY 1113
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 1657

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HO CHI MINH CITY 001144

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PGOV](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: VIETNAM'S TIGHTER GRIP ON THE INTERNET

REF: HCMC 412 B) HCMC 1012 AND PREVIOUS

HO CHI MIN 00001144 001.2 OF 003

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Party and the GVN have introduced new legal and technical measures to strengthen controls over the Internet. Much of the focus is centered on bolstering firewalls, preventing search engines from displaying unwanted content and centralizing Internet monitoring in Vietnam's state-controlled internet service providers. The arrests in HCMC of American citizen political activist Do Cong Thanh and six other Vietnamese activists indicate that police have the ability to target the dissident community in the south even as dissidents harness new technologies to get out their message of political change. End Summary.

TIGHTENING INTERNET REGULATIONS

¶2. (SBU) In his keynote speech during the April Party Congress, Phan Dien, outgoing Standing Member of the Party Secretariat, underscored the threat to Party rule from uncontrolled usage of the Internet and the urgent need of the Party to respond. Two months later, the National Assembly passed a new Information Technology Law, which, among other issues, further regulates Internet use. Article 12 prohibits "the provision, exchange, storage and usage of electronic data to oppose the government, sabotage "national unity," instigate violence, or foment racial hatred.

¶3. (U) The new law holds Internet Service Providers and owners of individual Internet kiosks accountable for customer violations. Article 16 stipulates that internet kiosks "have the responsibility, at requests of relevant agencies, to take timely and necessary measures to prevent access to illegal electronic contents." Article 19 requires that ISPs and Internet kiosk owners stop providing Internet search tools that provide access to illegal content.

¶4. (SBU) According to a contact in an HCMC-based ISP, a new version of the Internet Regulation was sent to all ISPs in July, requiring them to "provide physical space and to facilitate technical support" for the Ministry of Public Security to carry out missions of national security. The regulation requires ISPs to immediately stop internet access to those who "abuse the internet" to oppose the government.

Control Goes High-Tech

¶5. (SBU) According to HCMC press reports, in July, the Ministry of Posts and Telematics (MPT) instructed all ISPs to install new control and monitoring software in ISP-owned Internet kiosks. The software is designed to record information on users and their Internet behavior. The acquired data will be stored on

centralized servers in the ISPs' headquarters for at least one year. Registration controls at Internet kiosks also were stiffened. Thus far, two major ISPs -- state-owned Vietnam Data Communication Company and military-owned VietTel -- have started to install the required software in their Internet kiosks. Other ISPs such as Saigon Postel and FPT reportedly also are following suit.

¶6. (SBU) According to a contact at one of Vietnam's most prominent telecom companies that owns and operates Vietnam's internet backbone, at a typical Internet kiosk, an additional gateway computer is set up between the Local Area Network (LAN) and the Internet modem. This computer records the cyber activity of any computer within the LAN; suspicious Internet surfing is reported automatically back to a "policy server" at the ISP level. This contact told us that these "policy servers" update "blacklists" based on URL's and keywords, and are under the control of "relevant government authorities."

¶7. (SBU) Thus far, only public Internet kiosks are required to have these controls in place. Government and private business and household Internet access are not yet covered. Contacts in the industry told us that equipment at the ISP level can monitor and identify individual home subscriber Internet usage "violations." Dial-up connection phone numbers also can be easily tracked. At least some home ADSL Internet subscribers have their Internet usage monitored by newly installed software and hardware systems.

Actual Compliance Still Lax

¶8. (SBU) An admittedly unscientific sampling at various Internet kiosks in three provinces (HCMC, An Giang and Phu Yen) within HCMC's consular district in September showed that compliance with new access requirements remains lax. None of the kiosk administrators asked us or local Vietnamese patrons for identification, nor did we need a special username or password from an ISP as specified in the regulations. Only a few kiosks

HO CHI MIN 00001144 002.2 OF 003

in HCMC displayed the new internet regulations on their walls.

Differing Degrees Filtering

¶9. (SBU) We also ran a series of firewall tests at four different Internet kiosks in different districts in HCMC. One was affiliated with FPT, one with Saigon Net and two with VVN/Net Soft. The local and U.S. versions of "Google" were available at all four locations. Search results at all four locations showed the existence of major dissident websites as well as Radio Free Asia, but the links were non-functional. Only one service provider -- Net Soft -- gave access to the Voice of America web site.

¶10. (SBU) Overall the FTP kiosk had the most robust Internet controls. Results from keyword searches such as "democracy" and "religious freedom" were blocked both in English and Vietnamese. The Saigon Net-run kiosk was much more porous; it was possible to pull up the website of the IBIB, the overseas arm of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam.

¶11. (SBU) It was possible to pull up information on proxy servers and how to break firewall restrictions at all four locations. "Skype" was available at all four kiosks but "PalTalk" was blocked on the FTP kiosk. Interestingly, it also was possible to access overseas information at all four kiosks on AmCit political activist Do Cong Thanh. This suggests that firewall administrators had not yet updated the sites to block information on Thanh, even though news about his controversial arrest and subsequent expulsion from Vietnam was over a month old.

Government and Dissidents: Cat and Mouse

¶12. (SBU) Many dissident websites -- all hosted outside Vietnam -- post instructions on how to bypass GVN firewalls and use proxy servers to hide users' identities. The younger, tech-savvy dissidents look for new techniques to avoid monitoring and detection. Contacts in the dissident community tell us that many now use "Skype" and other Voice Over Internet Protocol tools to stay in touch with each other and with overseas contacts. Dissidents believe that -- at least for the moment -- it is hard for the police to identify and pinpoint Skype users, and to record their conversations to be used as "evidence" against them.

¶13. (SBU) HCMC-based political activist and founder of the "8406 Block" Do Nam Hai (aka Phuong Nam) told us that his home Internet service has been cut at least three times since December 2005. As a stopgap measure, Hai used Internet kiosks, but faced highly intrusive police surveillance; in some cases, plainclothes police often stood immediately behind him to read his e-mail despite his frequent protests. Hai said that, in response to these government efforts, he has begun to use a new service provided by the ISP of Electricity of Vietnam (EVN) that enables Internet access via cell phone to use Voice Over Internet programs and to send e-mail.

¶14. (SBU) The Internet is a vital communications tool for the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). For example, UBCV contacts tell us that many of the aides to UBCV leaders Thich Quang Do and Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang are computer and Internet literate and maintain their own Internet subscriptions. Thich Thien Hanh, the senior-most UBCV leader in Hue, has access to the Internet through a connection in one of the UBCV pagodas in the city. Thich Vien Dinh, a member of the UBCV national executive, has an active Internet connection at the UBCV's Giac Hoa pagoda in HCMC. He told us that, in the past, a dial-up connection rented from ISP provider VNPT was cut, but subsequently he was able to secure an ADSL line through the military-owned VietTel ISP. This connection has been untouched since its inception. In late September, Thich Quang Do reportedly obtained an Internet connection at his Thanh Minh Zen Monastery where he lives under quasi "pagoda arrest." He apparently registered the connection through a nun who also resides at the Pagoda.

GVN Does Not Sit Idly By

¶15. (SBU) The MPS is responding. In August and September, MPS officers arrested Do Cong Thanh, a computer specialist, and at least six other Vietnamese-citizen activists of the People's Democracy Party of Vietnam (PDP-VN). Like other dissident groups, the PDP-VN used overseas-based servers to host websites that exposed corruption and malfeasance within the GVN and Communist Party and advocated for multi-party democracy and peaceful political change. In an interview given in the United States after his release and expulsion from Vietnam, Do

HO CHI MIN 00001144 003.2 OF 003

concluded that the police's ability to intercept and read his personal e-mails helped the authorities track him and his PDP colleagues. Do and other PDP members used pseudonyms when posting articles on the Internet.

Comment

¶16. (SBU) The Party is moving ahead to address "weaknesses" in Internet controls identified during the Party Congress. Although there is significant variation in the robustness of Internet firewalls between the different ISPs that we sampled, our sense is that the more restrictive access on the FTP site is the harbinger of the future. Other, smaller ISPs will follow FTP's lead in bolstering firewalls, preventing search engines from displaying unwanted content and centralizing Internet monitoring within Vietnam's ISPs. Moreover, the recent arrest of the PDP activists and the earlier arrests of the "PalTalk"

group (Ref B) suggest that the MPS has at least some ability to trace critical targets.

¶17. (SBU) The UBCV's current unmolested use of the Internet suggests that the MPS -- for the moment -- finds it advisable to try and monitor what the UBCV is saying to its overseas contacts rather than forcing its leadership to communicate through cut-outs. Meanwhile, the dissident community is trying to stay one step ahead using new technological innovations (such as USB microdrives) to transmit information and defeat Internet controls in an attempt to reach Vietnam's rapidly growing Internet-literate population. End comment.
Winnick